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Author

Jones, Jamal A

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Text and Tradition in South India. By VELCHERU NARAYANA RAO. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2016. 506pp. ISBN: 978-1-4384-6775-7.

Velcheru Narayana Rao (or “VNR”) is the pre-eminent scholar of Telugu studies in the American academy. His works, composed singly and with a stable of collaborators, now form the small library of monographs and translations that practically constitutes the field’s literature. What’s more, in over thirty years he has produced a crop of insightful essays that bring the substantial body of Telugu traditions to bear on the broad questions of South Asian and literary studies. Among them are the fifteen pieces collected in the present volume.

Covering over 900 years of south Indian literary traditions, the essays’ stand-out themes include “concepts of author, text, and the historicity of text cultures,” as well as “orality and literacy” and “the quiet impact of colonial modernity on Indian text practices” (p. 11). This broad thematic and chronical compass is cut by VNR’s attentiveness to texts’ social and ideological dimensions. At the same time, he aims to oppose reductive analyses, holding literature to be fundamentally multivocal— susceptible to a variety of interpretations, possessing lives and afterlives, and thus distinct from and “unfettered by . . . overpowering authorial sermon” (p. 416).

General introductions to premodern Telugu literature come in Chapters One (“Multiple Literary Cultures in Telugu: Court, Temple, and Public”) and Four (“Coconut and Honey: Sanskrit and Telugu in Medieval Andhra”).

Chapter One definitively maps major modes and tensions in precolonial Telugu literary cultures rather than comprehensively cataloging authors and works. VNR heeds especially the traditions' narratives about its beginnings in the eleventh-century south Indian courts and subsequent moments when poets resisted or renovated these earlier paradigms. Chapter Four highlights Telugu's relationship with Sanskrit. In particular, VNR traces the ways it adopted Sanskrit poetry and grammar, and alludes to how it ultimately "acquired a status similar that of Sanskrit in preceding centuries" (p. 166). This tension between Sanskritic paradigms and other modes in Telugu is a broader preoccupation in the collection.

Chapters Two ("Notes on Political Thought in Medieval and Early Modern South India," co-authored with Sanjay Subrahmanyam) and Five ("Multiple Lives of a Text: The *Sumati Śatakamu* in colonial Andhra") demonstrate the contribution of Telugu materials to the study of south India political culture. Chapter Two leverages the sizable corpus of poetry on *nīti* (pragmatic politics) and shows it to be a necessary archive for premodern political history. In Five VNR picks up the argument's modern threads. He asks how an anthology of cynical poetic maxims for small-time political functionaries (village scribes or *karaṇams*) was co-opted as a moral grammar for children by colonial authorities. This essay stands out for its rich literary-historical method as much as its historical contributions: VNR examines the work's manuscript and print incarnations to reveal the contours of the culture that would encounter colonial modernity. In so doing, the chapter

incidentally offers a short course in the reading protocols for premodern Telugu poetry.

Chapters Three (“Purāṇa as Brahminic Ideology”) and Thirteen (“Purāṇa”) push beyond text-critical approaches to the *purāṇa*. Instead VNR defines the genre by its place in a larger society of texts (p. 139) and the ideological and epistemological frameworks it uses to structure narrative traditions. Chapter Thirteen in particular complicates philological debates over the genre’s being oral or textual. Eschewing either/or propositions, VNR suggests that *purāṇas* (and Indian texts more generally) stride the line: better to recognize that the “recorded” (or written) text is actualized by the tradition (author/performer or *paurāṇika*, and audience) to form the “received” text of living performance and interpretation (pp. 444-445).

Three middle chapters attend to Rāmāyaṇa traditions and questions of gender. In Chapter Six (“When Does Sītā Cease to be Sītā: Notes toward a Cultural Grammar of Indian Narratives”) VNR juxtaposes Sanskrit Rāmāyaṇas with Telugu retellings (ranging from oral traditions to modernist short fiction) and illuminates how the Rāmāyaṇa functions as a language for articulating Indian value systems. Chapter Seven (“A Rāmāyaṇa of Their Own: Women’s Oral Tradition in Telugu”) concentrates on oral Ramayana traditions among brahmin and non-brahmin women and how the songs voice strategies for the singers’ persistence and resistance within hierarchies of gender and caste. Standing as rich appendices to this essay are the two previously unpublished translations of Ramayana songs in the volume’s last two chapters (“A Day in

the Life of a Housewife: Sītā Locked Out” and “Urmila Sleeps: A Ramayana Song”). Chapter Eight (“The Politics of Telugu Ramayanas: Colonialism, Print Culture, and Literary Movements”) concludes the published Ramayana cycle. It shows how the Ramayana assumed a new “textual integrity” under the influence of colonial philology and therefore was subject to novel forms of devotion and critique.

Chapters Nine (“Epics and Ideologies: Six Telugu Folk Epics”) and Ten (“Texture and Authority: Telugu Riddles and Enigmas”) examine how communities construct and are constructed by the genres of caste epic and riddles respectively. Especially provocative here is the argument linking riddle and prophecy (and not just a prophecy in riddling form): Both, VNR suggests, presume and produce communities that can decipher them.

Chapters Eleven (“Buddhism in Modern Andhra: Literary Representations from Telugu”) and Twelve (“The Indigenous Modernity of Gurujada Apparao and Fakir Mohan Senapati”) concentrate on nineteenth- and twentieth-century Telugu literature’s reception of colonial modernity. Eleven details how non-Buddhist writers deployed Buddhist narratives to construct and critique Indian nationalist identities. Twelve challenges the tendency to identify certain novelists as social reformers. VNR’s closer readings find instead skepticism toward the promises of reform and deeper sympathies with precolonial traditions. But readers must and should look to VNR’s wider corpus for a more complete characterization of the “indigenous modernity” invoked in the essay’s title.

Delivered in clear and direct prose, the volume's arguments invite novel readings, would be a boon to classroom discussions, and suggest further avenues of inquiry into south Indian literature's performative and social dimensions. Furthermore, VNR's theoretical provocations—such as “the text writes the author” (p. 198), the “recorded/received” dyad, and the interest in “indigenous modernity”—merit further elaboration and interrogation, as well as more direct engagement with wider debates in historical and literary scholarship. In all, the breadth and depth of VNR's work is staggering. I can only hope that in collecting these essays together the present volume will make the bounty of VNR's scholarship even more accessible.

Jamal A. Jones

University of California, Davis

jaajones@ucdavis.edu